



# California Behavioral Health Planning Council

Advocacy • Evaluation • Inclusion

The Crisis of Housing and Homelessness:  
Effective Programs to Bridge the Gap from  
Homelessness to Housing

May 2020

The California Behavioral Health Planning Council (Council) is under federal and state mandate to advocate on behalf of adults with severe mental illness and children with severe emotional disturbance and their families. The Council is also statutorily required to advise the Legislature on behavioral health issues, policies and priorities in California. The Council advocates for an accountable system of seamless, responsive services that are strength-based, consumer and family member driven, recovery oriented, culturally and linguistically responsive and cost effective. Council recommendations promote cross-system collaboration to address the issues of access and effective treatment for the recovery, resiliency and wellness of Californians living with severe mental illness.

## **Introduction:**

The crisis of California's housing shortage and its growing homeless population yields tremendous concern and a call to action across party lines: a true public health emergency that affects us all. Across the state, there are over 150,000 people living homeless on any given night and 33 homeless persons per 10,000 people in the general population; there has also been a 14% increase since 2014.<sup>1</sup> There are those that are visibly homeless, and there are those that are living in their cars, couch surfing or on the brink of homelessness. The substantial lack of housing in California also contributes to its rising cost, creating a scarce and unaffordable housing market. Many are eager to address the issue to alleviate immediate challenges, as well as paving the way for long-term solutions. Numerous funding sources have been allocated to address the crisis at an accelerated rate; and we continue to see the growth of innovative methods to meet the need at all levels of government and in the private sector.

Despite the statewide implementation of a Housing First policy, not all are 'housing ready' and often require transitional services that will prepare them for success in housing. On the other hand, while housing is the answer to homelessness, other housing-related services must be in place until enough is available. The long-term solution is to develop a housing continuum, housing that meets the needs of all the state's residents, but the short-term need is a continuum of housing-related services to remove barriers and bridge the gap to a sustainable housing placement. There are several housing-related services that are provided throughout the state that have shown to be successful, to which the California Behavioral Health Planning Council's (Council) Housing and Homeless Committee (HHC) has taken a vested interest. The housing resources and services provided below are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather highlighted examples the HHC urgently recommends be available in all counties to provide a bridge to housing. Instances of homelessness should be rare, brief, and non-cyclical. All Californians should have the opportunity to be set on a pathway to stability.

## **Personal Storage Lockers:**

"Since 2011, homeless people have had three days warning to move their things before city crews cleared them away."<sup>2</sup> Significant barriers that persons who are homeless and living on the streets face, is a safe place to store their belongings. It has become too common a sight for the sidewalks to be cluttered with shopping carts, makeshift tents and other varied personal belongings. Should the individual need to attend a doctor appointment, meet with a caseworker, job hunt, use public transportation, work or another important obligation, the challenge of where to harbor their sole possessions, creates an immense predicament and

<sup>1</sup> *National Alliance to End Homelessness*: 2019 | <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/california/>

<sup>2</sup> Think Dignity: <https://www.thinkdignity.org/transitional-storage-center-tsc>

burden. This then leads to these persons being further disconnected from community and much needed professional support. Individuals who are homeless and living on the streets have enough hurdles to manage; they shouldn't have to choose between staying with their personal belongings or going to an important appointment. Storage facilities change that by giving folks the opportunity to focus on improving their lives rather than worry about losing their precious few possessions. "Just as important this will help clear our neighborhoods and public spaces of shopping carts, tents and debris."<sup>3</sup> Storage bins provide a place for homeless individuals to safely store their personal belongings, allowing them to use public transportation, job hunt, work, attend classes, meet with health professionals and other service providers, and begin to transition off the streets, while freeing the streets of over 30,000 pounds of personal belongings.<sup>4</sup>

Cities that have implemented this resource, have seen persons gain employment, obtain housing, and move off the streets. In addition to a secure place to store belongings, it is also an opportunity to help inform and connect persons with other resources. This could include behavioral health services, housing services, or other types of support and/or services to which they greatly benefit because of their dire circumstances rooted in homelessness. It can also be a time to check client's names with the Homeless Management Information System, which tracks service providers that might have helped these persons in the past.<sup>5</sup> Storage bins are well utilized, in demand, and many require a person to get on a waiting list in order to obtain this simple and vital support. It is apparent this resource suits a need, and has demonstrated its ability to help persons leverage out of homelessness. One example of where storage locker services is being practiced is in Venice, California, through an organization called Venice Community Housing.

- Venice Community Housing Website: <http://www.vchcorp.org/free-storage-venice/>

### **Safe Parking Lots:**

Homelessness does not happen overnight; it is often the result of sequential ill-fated circumstances that lead to losing a home such as eviction or being priced out from the rising rents. After such a catastrophic occurrence, a person or family may be left with a car for a home. The loss of a vehicle is one of the final steps to living on the streets and potentially becoming chronically homeless. Living out of a car presents unique challenges; namely finding a place to safely park their car overnight. The hurdles include a place where they do not face

<sup>3</sup> Think Dignity: <https://www.thinkdignity.org/transitional-storage-center-tsc>

<sup>4</sup> Think Dignity: <https://www.thinkdignity.org/transitional-storage-center-tsc>

<sup>5</sup> Storage Center for Homeless Opens in Sherman Heights: <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/homelessness/sd-me-storage-preview-20180611-story.html>

getting a number of parking violations, being towed, community resistance, or simply a place to feel safe, especially for families with children. Other barriers that arise as a result of living out of a vehicle is access to basic amenities such as a bathroom, shower and laundry services. “When they desire a shower or clean clothes, they must take time out of their day to search for available facilities. All the while suffering the indignity of traveling on public transportation in an unclean state. It can be quite stressful, and even costly when considering the transportation and facility fees.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to a safe place to park, consideration to basic human needs are just as important for their health, safety, and well-being so these types of services are a means to leverage out of homelessness and into housing. We, as a state, need to eliminate scrutiny and penalties for persons who live in their cars. Doing so only makes it harder for people to return to stable housing. Successful non-profit organizations that provide safe parking lots also provide supportive case-management services and resources, such as a volunteer nurse or case worker to assist in medical assistance, referrals and counseling for health issues and counsel on housing, education and other services available to persons that are homeless. Listed below are some examples in California where safe parking services paired with various supportive services are provided.

- East Palo Alto, CA: <https://www.projectwehope.org/mobile>
- Los Angeles, CA: <https://www.safeparkingla.org/>

### **Financial Literacy and Supportive Services:**

An important resource to couple with safe parking or temporary housing is financial literacy, which could include screening for potential eligibility for public benefits, analysis of existing debt and a review of credit status, plan for debt reduction, personalized budget for fixed or limited income, setting financial goals for re-housing and stabilization, and tax preparation assistance. Some organizations have partnered with Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA), a federal program that provides free in-person tax assistance to most households earning \$54,000 or less.<sup>7</sup> The Earned Income Tax Credit is considered the nation’s largest and most effective anti-poverty program.<sup>8</sup>

The concept and success of food trucks has blossomed into a mobile resource that provides healthy hot meals to CalFresh recipients and assistance with CalFresh applications. The food trucks have also been a tool for workforce development for those who wish to start their own food truck business or other related food business skills such as restaurant management, food distribution/procurement and culinary arts. Supporting people on their path to stability is a multi-step process and each individual/family follows a different path. This array of services

<sup>6</sup> Project WeHOPE: <https://www.projectwehope.org/mobile>

<sup>7</sup> Dreams for Change: <https://www.dreamsforchange.org/>

<sup>8</sup> Dreams for Change: <https://www.dreamsforchange.org/>

address key areas for long-term success with support to remove barriers, employment and education and income stabilization. These kinds of services directly confront the systematic nature of poverty and the homeless crisis. An example of where these supportive services are provided and paired with safe parking is in San Diego, California, through an organization called Dreams for Change.

- Dreams for Change Website: <https://www.dreamsforchange.org/>

### **Mental Health and Supportive Housing Services:**

A common obstacle faced by persons who are making a committed effort to improve their lives, is balancing the many places they are required to be to attend appointments with various providers. It can be overwhelming for some to navigate the complex network of services located all over the city. For those that rely on public transportation, they lose hours of time while traveling not to mention spending their limited resources on transportation costs. Providing a comprehensive array of services and housing programs within one organization has shown to be greatly beneficial to the persons it serves. This eliminates complications and barriers to accessing a multitude of services and fosters a community of support. Services can include intensive case management, life skills education, psychiatric services, employment support, clinical therapy, co-occurring substance use treatment, residential support services, opportunities for social connectedness, meaningful activities and crisis intervention. Learning the necessary skills to perform well in a job interview and successfully reenter the workforce is a crucial piece of support when assisting persons experiencing homelessness. Workforce development strategies can be provided in different ways. One particular organization has developed partnerships with businesses, who offer mock interviews and provide feedback, as well as additional support for persons with mental health challenges to foster successful employment. All of these services collectively address and prevent homelessness; a “whatever it takes” model to assure a person’s needs are met. An example of an organization that has been successful with this ‘one-stop-shop’ support of services is in Sacramento, California called, Hope Cooperative (formerly TLCS).

- Hope Cooperative Website: <https://hopecoop.org/>

### **Supportive Services for Pet Owners Who are Homeless:**

California has the highest rate of unsheltered homeless individuals, around 70%, meaning that they are very likely to be spending their nights outside rather than in a bed provided by a city or non-profit.<sup>9</sup> According to Pets of the Homeless, an estimated five to ten percent of the 3.5

<sup>9</sup>One Approach to Fighting California’s Homelessness Crisis: Make Room for Pets: <https://time.com/5531055/california-homeless-pets/>

million Americans that are experiencing homelessness have dogs or cats.<sup>10</sup> Unsheltered homeless persons that have pets often choose to forgo available beds, because many shelters don't have the infrastructure necessary to care for them. This predicament also creates lost opportunities to connect these persons to other services and more stable housing. Some shelters put conditions on allowing pets, requiring documentation that shows they are support animals or up-to-date on their vaccinations, while others don't allow them at all. This leads to a subset of people "who are just going to be unwilling and unable to access the help they need."<sup>11</sup> One study of homeless youth in Los Angeles found that, while having a pet made it more difficult to stay in a shelter, those with animals also reported fewer symptoms of depression and loneliness.<sup>12</sup> In Los Angeles, only six shelters out of 46 in the region allow pets onsite, while it is estimated that 25 percent of people experiencing homelessness in the region have pets.<sup>13</sup> These pets provide warmth, security, and companionship to many who have otherwise found themselves down on their luck.

Prior to becoming homeless, many are often forced to relocate to a place that does not allow pets to which many would prefer to be homeless with their pet than in a home without them. Some make the difficult decision to relinquish their pets to shelters and rescue groups often due to lack of funds to provide adequate veterinary care. It is important to recognize that financial status does not alter the capacity to love and care for an animal. Pets provide a special connection and emotional support for the owner; a bond they may not otherwise have for those without family and/or friends. All persons thrive with emotional support and companionship, and pets provide just that. It is in the best interest for the pet and the owner to be kept together. The ability to love and care for their pet provides comfort when enduring the harsh realities related to homelessness. So we can compassionately and effectively support these persons in need of stable housing and resources, we must consider the needs of their pets. "Simply put, when we care for pets, we are supporting both ends of the leash; this is a common sense way to quickly help people get off the street."<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, the growing attention to the needs of persons who are homeless with pets, led to the recent enacting of the California Senate Bill 109. The bill authorizes approximately \$5

<sup>10</sup> Lawmakers Approve Hertzberg Bill to Shelter People with Pets:

<https://sd18.senate.ca.gov/news/5212019-lawmakers-approve-hertzberg-bill-shelter-people-pets>

<sup>11</sup> One Approach to Fighting California's Homelessness Crisis: Make Room for Pets:

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<sup>14</sup> Lawmakers Approve Hertzberg Bill to Shelter People with Pets:

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million in Pet Assistance and Support Program funds for qualified homeless shelters to provide shelter, food, and basic veterinary services for pets owned by individuals experiencing homelessness, along with staffing and liability insurance related to providing those services. Shelters that are animal friendly break the barrier for owners to not have to choose between shelter and giving up their pet. In instances of extreme weather, it is important for homeless persons with pets to seek shelter especially on the coldest, wettest and/or windiest nights. The Extreme Weather Shelter (EWS) is a pet-friendly program which provides shelter to adults in need on nights of inclement weather based on guidelines from the National Weather Service. Attendees receive a shower, clothing, and dinner before being transported to the local church to sleep for the night. This type of program is offered in Arcata, California called Arcata House Partnership.

- Arcata House Partnership: <http://www.arcatahouse.org/home-2>

Pet owners also require resources to receive regular veterinarian care such as addressing immediate medical issues, vaccinations, and treating injuries. This type of service is offered free to homeless pet owners in Chico, California called Chico Homeless Animal Outreach.

- Chico Homeless Animal Outreach: <https://www.chicohomelessanimaloutreach.net/>

For homeless pet owners, access to services for their pets to get spayed or neutered is also crucial to reduce unwanted cats and dogs from ending up in the shelter. This type of service as well as other routine veterinarian services are offered in Long Beach, California.

- Fix Long Beach: <https://fixlongbeachpets.com/>

### **Outreach Supportive Services:**

The most vulnerable and disengaged among those experiencing homelessness are persons enduring chronic street homelessness. Their lives are heavily impacted on a daily basis by the dire straits of lack of appropriate shelter, food and security, basic needs all humans need to survive. Many people will avoid going to mainstream shelters and day programs for good reasons – they are afraid, they have pets, and staying in shelters may mean disrupting important and close relationships they see as vital to surviving on the streets. Outreach is important in order to access hard-to-reach individuals and involves moving outside the walls of the agency to engage with people experiencing homelessness who may be disconnected and alienated not only from mainstream services and supports, but from the services targeting homeless persons as well. Street outreach and engagement are critical components to respond to the homeless crisis and help pave the way to engagement to various housing related services. Outreach “brings the front door” to unsheltered residents by fostering relationships

through support and resource connection.<sup>15</sup> Street health teams provide access to care through multi-disciplinary action to meet the unique needs of people experiencing homelessness through regularly scheduled outreach services to persons living in homeless encampments, vehicles, and RVs.<sup>16</sup> Outreach applied with a holistic approach builds relationships that lead to long-term health through connections to primary care, social services, housing, and other resources. Street health teams directly provide street psychiatry and substance use recovery services to unsheltered people sleeping on the streets, linking many to high-value care that address a clients' physical, mental, and social well-being in one location. This type of outreach service is offered in Oakland, California called Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless.

- Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless: <https://www.achch.org/street-health.html>

Los Angeles also has a robust outreach field based collaboration of public and private resources to connect persons to services to unserved or underserved individuals who are homeless and have mental illness. HOME engages homeless persons residing in parks, on streets, and under freeways to offer compassionate, knowledgeable, collaborative assistance in accessing medical, psychiatric and social services.<sup>17</sup> Team members provide consultation, advocacy, transportation, and intensive case management in order to empower individuals to develop their goals, become self-sufficient, and success-fully transition to stable community living.<sup>18</sup> The program ensures coordination and linkage to services and support, including housing, mental health services, access to healthcare, and benefits establishment.

- Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement (HOME): [http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dmh/186286\\_HOMEBrochure10-08.pdf](http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dmh/186286_HOMEBrochure10-08.pdf)

## **Conclusion:**

In order to efficiently and effectively support those impacted by the housing and homelessness crisis, strategic investments and multi-system collaboration are crucial. By bringing awareness to effective programs, we can create a network of sharing and duplicate these programs in communities across the state. We must continue to implement and scale-up housing-related services while simultaneously striving for the long-term solution to create a housing system that works for all, no matter a person's past or circumstances. The more people that we can

<sup>15</sup> Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless: <https://www.achch.org/street-health.html>

<sup>16</sup> Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless: <https://www.achch.org/street-health.html>

<sup>17</sup> Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement (HOME): [http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dmh/186286\\_HOMEBrochure10-08.pdf](http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dmh/186286_HOMEBrochure10-08.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement (HOME): [http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dmh/186286\\_HOMEBrochure10-08.pdf](http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dmh/186286_HOMEBrochure10-08.pdf)

connect to resources and services by meeting them at their stage of need, the better we can properly track and identify the housing needs of our most vulnerable residents and reduce the number of persons who cycle in and out of our systems. California will continue to see persons fall through the cracks and unnecessary human suffering without proper prevention, rapid intervention and making available the appropriate level of services as previously mentioned. If we as a state truly wish to alleviate the chronic housing shortage and homeless crisis, the key is connection to a continuum of services across the spectrum of need that eventually leads to a permanent place to live and thrive. While California works to increase its housing stock, an array of housing services should be our shared priority, to ultimately achieve the shared vision to eliminate homelessness and have housing for all.